

THE ESSEX HALL LECTURE 1992

**RAMMOHUN ROY AND "THE DAY-STAR OF APPROACHING MORN"**

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This is the Essex Hall Lecture for 1992 and it was delivered in Bristol, on April 11, 1992. Essex Hall is the London headquarters of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches and stands on the site of the building where the first avowedly Unitarian congregation in an English speaking country met over two hundred years ago. The lecture was founded in 1892 and many distinguished persons in various fields have contributed to the series. The delivery of the lecture is one of the leading events during the General Assembly's Annual Meetings.

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1. RAMMOHUN ROY: "WHAT AN INTERESTING MAN IS THIS!"

In 1817 English versions of some Hindu Scriptures were published in London. (1) These translations had, in fact, first appeared in Calcutta during the previous year. They had been made by a certain Hindu of independent means called "Rammohun Roy". The reprint had been edited by one John Digby while on leave from his duties with the Bengal civil service. In it he prefixes an account of the translator: "Rammohun Roy . . . is by birth a Brahmin of very respectable origin, in the

province of Bengal, about forty-three years of age. His acquirements are considerable: to a thorough knowledge of the Sanscrit (the language of the Brahminical Scriptures) he has added Persian and Arabic; and possessing an acute understanding, he early conceived a contempt for the religious prejudices and absurd superstitions of his caste . . . . . He was afterwards employed as a Dewan, or principal native officer, in the collection of revenues, in the district of which I was for five years Collector, in the East India Company's Civil Service. By perusing all my public correspondence with diligence and attention as well as by corresponding and conversing with European gentlemen, he acquired so correct a knowledge of the English language to be enabled to write and speak it with considerable accuracy." (2)

The earliest published notices of Rammohun had in fact appeared in Baptist Periodicals in 1816. (3) But the earliest published notice of Rammohun in a Unitarian Journal shows that within five years of Digby's account there had been a fascinating turn in events. The correspondent quotes in full a letter written by Rammohun in English dated Sept. 5, 1820. In his own words it explains why Rammohun had become the subject of attention from Christians of such widely differing views: ". . . I regret . . . that the followers of Jesus, in general, should have paid much greater attention to inquiries after his nature than to the observance of his commandments. . . . . On this consideration I have compiled several passages of the New Testament which I thought essential to Christianity, and published them under the designation of "Precepts of Jesus", at which the Missionaries at Serampur have expressed great displeasure, and called me, in their review of the tract, an injurer of the cause of truth. I was, therefore, under the necessity of defending myself in an 'Appeal to the Christian Public'. . . ." (4)

A further notice in 1822 (5) gave the controversy some human interest: "Mr. Adam, a Baptist Missionary, awakened by the arguments of this Hindoo Reformer, has declared himself a Unitarian, and established a Unitarian press . . . . . Mr. Adam . . . . remains at Calcutta, supported and encouraged by some of its respectable inhabitants, who are about to erect an Unitarian Chapel for him."

Dr. Lant Carpenter had been minister of Lewin's Mead Meeting in Bristol since 1817. It is unlikely that he or his household would have overlooked these and other notices which appeared in "The Monthly Repository" (6), the chief organ of the Unitarian movement at that time. But we can imagine the impact which the following letter to Dr. Carpenter from Henry Taylor of Liverpool (7) would have had upon the minister's family as a whole: "My Dear Sir,/ The accompanying copy of Rammohun Roy's 'Final Appeal' is forwarded to you by desire of the author, as you will find expressed in a letter I have lately received from him, and a copy of which I also transmit for your perusal. What an interesting man is this! Why do not our Unitarian Fund Committee commence a correspondence with him, for who so

proper, or so well qualified to convert the heathen? Books should be sent him, and in short every means should be pursued to assist him in his noble though arduous undertaking." Rammohun's letter is designed to introduce himself to leading British Unitarians, among whom he numbers Dr. Carpenter. It had an immediate effect. Dr. Carpenter wrote, "His services in the cause of philanthropy and religion were, in a special manner brought forward to this congregation (ie. Lewin's Mead); when an appeal was made to it, answered with more than its wonted liberality to assist in the establishment of Unitarian worship in the capital of British India." (8)

The particular reasons for the Unitarian interest in Rammohun were early indicated (in 1817) by Thomas Belsham, the minister of the Essex Street Chapel in London. The first was to do with Rammohun's social status and education: "Rammohun Roy, a learned, eloquent, and opulent Brahmin, having by the proper exercise of his own understanding, discovered the folly and absurdity of the Hindoo mythology and of idol-worship . . . . . has entered his protest against their impious, barbarous and idolatrous rites. Such doctrine from a person of such exalted rank, at first excited great astonishment, and gave infinite offence. But by degrees, the courage, eloquence, and perseverance of this extraordinary man prevailed over all the opposition; and it is said that many hundreds of the native Hindoos, and especially of the young people, have embraced his doctrine." (9)

So far, Christianity had only made any headway with the poor of India. Furthermore, Rammohun's rank and education overcame any reservations which might have been entertained about the moral and intellectual calibre of his race. Such concerns seem uppermost in an anonymous poetic obituary that was later to appear in a Bristol newspaper:

"Twas thine to see, to feel the shame.  
Alas, what millions are blind!  
Insensible they bear the name,  
But 'Man' is not their grade or kind -  
Dark, vicious, cruel, mean, and base,  
A grov'ling, vile, and abject race." (10)

Rammohun is deemed praiseworthy on the grounds that he is untypical of his race. The extent to which racial prejudice could affect the assessment of a person even, as in the case of Rammohun, of recognised worthiness, is illustrated by the remark of someone who was able to observe him socially on his later visit to England: "He is a curiosity certainly but seems to me to be very much bewildered and, blacklike, generally to agree with the last speaker". (11)

The second aspect of Rammohun's significance as outlined by Belsham's early notice is more important: "He told a worthy clergyman at Calcutta about a year ago, that

he preferred Christianity to all other religions, and would certainly embrace it, if it were not for the doctrine of the Trinity. This was an insurmountable obstacle. At the beginning of this year, in January 1817, he informed the same respectable clergyman, that he was now in the way of ascertaining whether the doctrine of the Trinity is or is not the doctrine of the New Testament . . . . . The result of this enquiry has not yet reached England." (11) The immediate fruit of Rammohun's enquiry was his four pages of mild and inoffensive preface to "The Precepts of Jesus" (1820). As a result of criticism this then evoked a first "Appeal in Defence" (1820) of 20 pages and a "Second Appeal" (1821) of 150 pages, and culminated in a "Third and Final Appeal" (1823) of 256 pages.

All of these had been inspired by a controversy which had been raging with the Baptist missionaries working at Serampore, where Carey, Marshman and Ward had founded a College in 1818. They were the first Protestant missionaries from England to establish work in India. Rammohun assisted them with a translation of the Bible and to this end learned both Hebrew and Greek. "The Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness" was printed at the Baptist Mission Press in 1820. It was mainly a compilation of the ethical sayings of Jesus, taken primarily from the first three Gospels, but without the historical or mythological framework. Thus Jesus's birth, death and resurrection, as well as the miracles, were all left out. The emphasis was on the authoritative teaching of Jesus. Rammohun explained that he wished to avoid controversy, and whether he believed them or not miraculous events were liable to arouse doubts and disputes among free-thinkers and anti-Christians. Furthermore the accounts of miracles and wonders would carry little weight among Hindus, because Hindu mythology contained tales of an even more wonderful nature.

The "Precepts" immediately came under attack from Joshua Marshman. He deplored this attempt by what he called a "heathen" to misrepresent Christianity. He argued that the precepts of Jesus in themselves could not be a guide to peace and happiness. Only belief in the deity of Christ and his atoning death could bring peace. Furthermore, in his sayings Jesus had claimed attributes of divinity for himself.

Rammohun was surprised at being attacked by a Christian rather than a Hindu, and was offended at being called a "heathen". Nevertheless, he took up the challenge in his three "Appeals". In these he showed that he was something more than a deist who, under the influence of Unitarianism, denied the divinity of Christ. Rammohun's attitude to Christianity sprang from a real concern for the uniqueness of Christ and his teaching. A modern Indian Christian has argued quite convincingly that Rammohun's was an early attempt to demythologise the Christian religion: "He saw, what the missionaries could not see, that Jesus would simply be understood as another avatar if Christianity was presented in traditional western

garb. A story about a saviour who was born under miraculous circumstances, who performed supernatural deeds, who was put to death, but cheated his enemies and came to life again - would fit in excellently with the Vishnu Puranas and would be well received on the level of popular Hinduism . . . . . at the cost of the unique message of Jesus which India needed." (12)

The significance of Rammohun for Dr. Carpenter did not reside solely in aspirations towards the spread of Christianity in India. The worthy Rajah's views on the Trinity was a vindication of struggles closer to home. Commenting on Rammohun's endeavours - "whose writings display a remarkable acquaintance with the great points at issue between the Unitarian and the Trinitarian" - he remarks: "I have long been convinced that the unbelieving world will not be Christianised until the Christian world in general is Unitarianised; and the writings of the Hindoo Reformer add strength to this conviction." (13) The cherished hope that Rammohun would be the means by which a Unitarian form of Christianity would be established in India persisted even after his untimely death. Harriet Martineau expressed it in a hymn written for an obituary service:

"No faithless tears, O God! we shed  
For him . . . . .

No faithless tears! Though many dream  
To see his face by Ganges' stream;  
Though thousands wait on many a shore,  
The voice that shall be heard no more.." (14)

Miss Acland, in the same anthology (15), even gave expression to a pious fantasy that Rammohun's grave would become a place of pilgrimage for his converted compatriots:

"Perchance when o'er thy loved paternal bower,  
The Sun of Righteousness shall healing rise, -  
When India's children feel his noon-day power,  
And mingle all in Christian sympathies, -

Hither their pilgrim footsteps duly bound,  
With fervent zeal, these hallowed haunts shall trace,  
And sweetly solemn tears bedew the ground  
Where sleeps the friend and prophet of their race!"

Rammohun had arrived in England in 1831. Dr. Carpenter's eldest daughter Mary was an accomplished young woman of 24. Her father had conducted a school for boys, and Mary took her place in the classes, helped her mother in the domestic

side, and at an early age assumed duties as a teacher. When, because of health problems, Dr. Carpenter had to give up the school, Mrs. Carpenter in 1829 opened a boarding school for young ladies in which Mary did most of the teaching. Mary was no doubt fully in her father's confidence and shared his hopes and aspirations for the dawn of enlightenment signalled by Rammohun's endeavours.

Soon after Rammohun's arrival in April Dr. Carpenter and he met and the Reformer was conducted to a meeting of the Unitarian Association in Essex Street which expressed sympathy for his arduous and philanthropic labours and delight at his presence among them. It was no doubt at about this time that Mary was inspired or called upon by her father to exercise her literary skills and express the significance of the Rammohun-phenomenon in poetic form. The result was a sonnet preserved in manuscript in Manchester College library:

"When from afar we saw thy burning light  
Rise gloriously o'er darkened India's shore  
In spirit we rejoiced, and yet still more  
Arose our admiration and delight  
When, steadfast to pursue thy course aright,  
We saw thee brave fierce persecution's power.  
As yet we knew thee not, but that blest hour  
Which first revealed thee to our longing sight  
Awakened for thee deepest Christian love,  
And told us thou hadst sat at Jesus' feet. -  
But now a glowing halo from above  
Circles our thought of thee when to the seat  
Of Mercy, rapt in ardent prayer, we come.  
Our Father, lead Thy wandering children home!"

What has been conveniently forgotten here is Rammohun's attempts to return to the pure monotheism of the Hindu Scriptures. Although nowhere spelled out, it was evident that Rammohun believed that all religions stemmed from a common monotheistic root apprehended by reason. But in the eyes of Mary Carpenter Rammohun has discovered revealed Truth. Having "sat at Jesus' feet" he is ready to assist in the leading of the "wandering children" of India home to their fore-destined place in the fold of Unitarian Christianity. Hopes were high.

They were soon to be cruelly dashed. A month or so after arriving at Bristol as the guest of the Carpenters Rammohun died. There is no record of the discussions which took place among the Unitarians of Bristol during the three weeks between this sad event and the Rajah's interment at Stapleton Grove. Despite the apparent affinity of principle between the Hindu reformer and his mentors, it was difficult for those arranging the funeral to decide on the appropriate rites. In the event, the

actual committal took place in silence. The wisdom and reverence of this decision in the face of some very pressing polemical considerations was well explained in poetic tribute to the Rajah's memory by a certain Miss Dale:

"No voice, no whisper broke the deep repose  
When to the earth that sacred dust was given;  
All silently the sacrifice arose  
From kindling hearts, in one pure flame, to Heaven.  
Pure from the sun of righteousness it came  
Upon those hearts. Language, to common thought  
Interpreter, had dimmed that holy flame  
Or, with the prism's power, to sight had brought  
The varying hues which human frailty throws  
O'er things divine. Oh! never more misplaced,  
Than at that grave where narrow bounds inclose  
Him, whose diffusive love had all mankind embraced." (16)

Clearly, in the face of providing valedictory rites on this most solemn of occasions, their confidence in the Christian convictions of the deceased had wavered. But it soon became apparent that Rammohun's sympathies had to be spelled out.

Even before Rammohun's interment a biographical notice appeared from the pen of his secretary Sandford Arnot. It made no mention of his Unitarian sympathies. There was evidently a pressing need to spell out the "true meaning" of Rammohun's life. This need was met by Dr. Carpenter in his "Review" of the Rajah's life, but something was needed to coincide with the interment – something which could be used on the occasion if not during the actual event, and which would create the appropriate impression in the press. Mary's literary talents were prevailed upon. The result was a series of five sonnets. They tell us a great deal about the "mythology" of Unitarians at this time.

## II. RAMMOHUN: "THE DAY-STAR OF APPROACHING MORN"

When Rammohun came to London he was feted by fashionable society. He met the famous and beautiful actress Fanny Kemble and visited the theatre with the Duke of Devonshire to see her play. These gaieties no doubt played into the hands of the "Puritan" party. The Carpenters' first task was to counter any possible aspersions on their hero's character. Dr. Carpenter attempted to offset any possible rumours in his biography written immediately after Rammohun's death: "I had myself repeated opportunities of observing with earnest respect how he appreciated true delicacy in the female character and I learn that, while he always maintained his habitual politeness to the sex, and may have therefore misled the superficial observer, he manifested a very prompt and clear discrimination as to individuals, and that he

commonly expressed strong dislike, and even disgust, where they seemed to him to depart from that true modesty which is essential to its excellence." (17) A biographical explanation for Rammohun's regard for the female sex recounted by Dr. Carpenter smacks a little of romantic legend, but there is no reason to doubt that the worthy divine obtained the information from Rammohun himself: "Without disputing the authority of his father, he often sought from him information as to the reasons of his faith; he obtained no satisfaction; and he at last determined at the early age of 15, to leave the paternal home, and sojourn for a time in Tibet, that he might see another form of religious faith. He spent two or three years in that country, and often excited the angers of the worshippers of the Lama by his rejection of their doctrine that this pretended deity – a living man – was the creator and preserver of the world. In these circumstances he experienced the soothing kindness of the female part of the family; and his gentle, feeling heart lately dwelt with deep interest, at the distance of more than forty years, on the recollections of that period which, he said, had made him always feel respect and gratitude towards the female sex." (18)

But Rammohun's altruistic concern for the status of women in India was genuine, and probably inspired his reforming endeavours. In 1811 his brother, Jaganmohun, died and his widow committed sati on his funeral pyre. We do not know whether Rammohun witnessed this, but he was profoundly affected. Between 1814 and 1820 the main drive of his writings was to counter the alleged religious justification of this atrocious custom and then to actively promote the rights of women. During his researches in Sanscrit literature, he had been impressed by the purity of its monotheistic doctrines in contrast to the prevailing idolatry of his own days. He therefore translated the Vedanta into Bengali and made abridgements of this in English and Hindustani. Next, in 1816, he translated two of the Upanishads into Bengali and English and, in 1817, wrote a defence of Hindu theism in Bengali. In 1818 he published, in English, his first tract on sati. In this he showed that the custom was not ordained by Hindu Scripture. In a second tract, published in 1820, he made an eloquent appeal in defence of the rights of women, showing that they were in no way inferior to men and were in some way superior to them.

All of this is skilfully woven into one of Mary's sonnets:

"Exil'd from home e'en in thy earliest youth,  
The healing balm of woman's love was pour'd  
Into thy troubled breast, and thence were stor'd  
Deep springs of gratitude and pitying ruth  
To lead thy race to that primeval truth  
Which, bright and pure, on all alike bestow'd,  
Points heavenward; and to guide them on the road  
Of Christian faith was thine. But yet to soothe



Neglected woman, to assert her right  
 To drink of wells of everlasting life;  
 To snatch her, trembling midst the dismal night  
 Of pagan horrors, from the fiery strife  
 Of dark-soul'd zealots - this must wake our love,  
 This, fervent, raise our thanks for thee above."

For all the historical veracity of what she has written, the central thesis of the sonnet - that Rammohun's vocation was to lead his race "on the road/ Of Christian faith" and to assert Indian woman's "right/To drink of wells of everlasting life" - is lop-sided. The Unitarian movement's aspirations at this time have begun to affect their account of Rammohun's activities.

We have already seen how, in the eyes of Mary, to have published the precepts of Jesus was to have "sat at the feet" of Jesus. For Mary, the words of Jesus are a divine revelation of salvific power. John's Gospel provided the appropriate metaphor in the story of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well: "Jesus answered and said unto her. 'If thou knewest the gift of God, and who is it saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water . . . . . Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.'" (John 4:10,13-15) It is true that "primeval truth" is accessible to all: the kindness which Rammohun met from women in his youth become "Deep springs of gratitude and pitying ruth". But there is no doubt in Mary's mind that this "primeval truth" finds its consummation in the teaching of Jesus.

The story of the Samaritan woman was an ideal example of the ministry of Jesus to those outside the authoritative Judaic revelation; the subject of womanhood allows Mary to introduce it, and she develops it in another sonnet in the series:

Thy Nation sat in darkness, for the night  
 Of pagan gloom was o'er it. Thou wast born  
 Midst superstition's ignorance forlorn.  
 Yet in thy breast there glow'd a heavenly light  
 Of purest truth and love, and to thy sight  
 Appear'd the day-star of approaching morn.  
 What ardent zeal did then thy life adorn,  
 From deep degrading guilt to lead aright  
 Thy fallen people, to direct their view  
 To that bless'd Sun of Righteousness, whence beams  
 Guidance to all that seek it - faithful, true -  
 To call them to the Saviour's living streams!

The cities of the East have heard thy voice:  
Nations behold your God! Rejoice! Rejoice! (Isaiah 40:9)

In a polemical vindication of Unitarianism (19) Lant Carpenter wrote: ". . . . . those of us who have observed the enquiries of Rammohun Roy of Calcutta . . . . . cheer themselves with the conviction that the day-star of Unitarianism has arisen . . . . in the East." Hand in hand with the certainty that the teaching of Jesus carried an authoritative revelation went an eschatology that assured these Unitarian Christians that they were on the winning side. Once again, it was Scripture that provided the basis for their confidence. Mary recounts how her father read the fortieth chapter of Isaiah at the memorial service held a week or so after Rammohun's death. (20) A marginal note tells us that the last line of Mary's first sonnet refers to the same passage: "O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings . . . . say unto the cities of Judah, 'Behold your God! Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand . . .'"

This cheerful eschatology expressed itself in political as well as religious categories. The idea that humankind was progressing inevitably towards a new dawn in which an enlightened liberalism would triumph was very much part of the climate of ideas. The continuator of Sophia Collet's biography of Rammohun describes it as "a time of crucial transition in the political history of the United Kingdom. He (ie. Rammohun) was an eager and sympathetic spectator of the stupendous revolution achieved by the first Reform Bill. The process began which has by successive extensions of the franchise transformed the government of this nation in fifty years from a close oligarchy to a democracy. While he was here, he saw the East India Company changed by statute from a trading concern into a political organisation: and that was practically the last renewal of its charter, prior to its replacement, in 1858, by the Imperial Government. He saw the Act pass which abolished slavery throughout the British dominions. The period of his visit also covers the passing of the Factory Act . . . . . He was here, in a word, when the New England was being born out of the heart of Old England – the New England of democracy, of social and industrial reform . . . . . and of Imperial policy tempered by Nonconformist Conscience." (21)

This political eschatology is expressed in another of Mary's sonnets:

"Far from thy native clime, a sea-girt land  
Sits thron'd among the nations. In the breasts  
Of all her sons immortal Freedom rests,  
And of her patriots many a holy hand  
Has sought to rouse the world from the command  
Of that debasing tyrant who detests  
The reign of truth and love. At their behests  
The slave is free, and Superstition's band

Sinks powerless. Hitherward thy steps were bent  
To seek free commune with each kindred soul,  
Whose highest powers are ever willing lent  
To free their race from folly's dark control.  
To our blest isle thou didst with transport come:  
Here thou hast found thy last, thy silent home."

But Rammohun's own untimely death reminded all that the most ardent hope of salvation was in the afterlife. Having begun his journey to salvation in the bosom of Unitarian Christianity, Rammohun had every right to share the Christian hope of immortality:

"Thy work thou didst fulfil while yet 'twas day,  
And still right onward towards thy beacon tend  
With faith and zeal. And now thy footsteps bend  
Where Christian friendship offers thee the stay  
Of sympathy and love. But who shall say  
What joy was ours, the eager ear to lend  
To all thy accents, and thy steps attend?  
The Angel of the Lord hath call'd away  
His faithful servant at the evening hour  
While glowing tints still gild the western sky.  
Yet though around our hearts dark sorrow lour,  
And tears of sad regret must dim the eye,  
We mourn not without hope. Thy race is run.  
Enter thy rest. Servant of God, well done!"

Mary has no difficulty in speaking of Rammohun's death in explicitly Christian terms based on 2 Timothy 4:6-8: "For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course . . . "

There was in fact some justification for an assertion that Rammohun had embraced the Christian view of eternal life. At Dr. Carpenter's behest, a certain Dr. Jerrard, principal of the Baptist College at Bristol, wrote an account of the Rajah's views which he had elicited during a dinner party a month or so before his death: "He (ie. Rammohun) explicitly declared that he believed in the miracles of Christ generally, and particularly in his resurrection, which he said was the foundation of the Christian faith, and the great fact on which rested his own hopes of the resurrection." (22) Not surprisingly, Dr. Carpenter was deeply gratified by this testimony. But the likely fate of Rammohun's heathen compatriots was more problematical. What biblical exemplar applied to their situation? The parable of Dives and Lazarus seemed to fit the bill: "(Lazarus) said, 'I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house: for I have five brethren;

that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' Abraham saith unto him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent.' And he said unto him, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.'" (Luke 16:27-31) Like Lazarus, Rammohun is in the bosom of Abraham. His compatriots not only have the testimony of Christ's resurrection, they even have more than the equivalent of the witness provided by "Moses and the prophets" in the writings of Rammohun. This was the key to Rammohun's continuing vocation beyond the grave, and the allusion to the parable is quite clear in the final lines of Mary's last sonnet:

"Bright hopes of immortality were given  
To guide thy dubious footsteps and to cheer  
Thine earthly pilgrimage. How firm and clear  
Arose thy faith that, as the Lord hath risen,  
So all his followers shall meet in heaven!  
Thou art gone from us, but thy memory dear  
To all that knew thee fades not. Still we hear  
And see thee yet as with us. Ne'er are riven  
The bands of Christian love! Thy mortal frame  
With us is laid in holy silent rest;  
Thy spirit is immortal, and thy name  
Shall by thy countrymen be ever blest.  
Into their hearts with power thy words are sent  
As from the dead. Surely they must repent."

The condemnatory tone carried over from the parable caused the poem to end on a somewhat gloomy note, a little out of keeping with the hope of imminent dawn. Before publication Mary revised the final couplet. At the cost of suppressing the biblical allusion it retained the point about Rammohun's writings while striking a rather more optimistic note as regards India's prospects of everlasting life:

"E'en from the tomb thy words with power shall rise,  
Shall touch their hearts, and bear them to the skies."

It comes as no small surprise to observe how "orthodox" Unitarianism is during this phase, and how firmly people like the Carpenters see themselves embedded in the mainstream of Protestant Christianity. Mary has no difficulty in finding paradigms of humanity seeking the full revelation in Jesus: the Old Testament poet-prophet, the Samaritan woman, the wealthy Jew. She has no difficulty in finding authoritative images which articulate a divinely-sanctioned system of rewards and punishments in an afterlife which, on Biblical authority, is seen as an objective reality. It represents a kind of innocence which we have lost forever: no longer can

we shelter in the groves of an Eden of authoritative myth construed as a literal reality.

What makes Mary Carpenter's response to the Rammohun phenomenon of abiding interest, however, is the fact that her use of the Judaeo-Christian mythology has been pushed to the limit. It had taken some 250 years for the forces unleashed in the Renaissance and Reformation to culminate in a Christianity "purified" of centuries of accretion. That process had been made possible by the universal accessibility of Scripture to the increasingly literate masses. But how was the pre-emptive activity of a "righteous pagan" without benefit of an evangelist's promptings to be explained within the terms of the mythology? That an encounter with the precepts of Jesus would lead the genuine enquirer into the path of truth was to be expected, but Rammohun was active in philanthropic endeavours before he encountered the Gospel. How was the Rammohun-phenomenon to be explained?

Mary Carpenter was obliged to postulate in simple terms a

" . . . . . primeval truth  
Which, bright and pure, on all alike bestow'd,  
Points heavenward . . ."

Given that this "primeval truth" found expression in both will and intellect, it could be expressed in two great abstracts:

". . . . . in thy breast there glow'd a heavenly light  
Of purest *truth* and *love* . . ." (Sonnet I)

Such was the reforming spirit of the age that these same two great absolutes could find expression in overtly political terms:

".....of her (ie. England's) patriots many a holy hand  
Has sought to rouse the world from the command  
Of that debasing tyrant who detests  
The reign of *truth* and *love*."

It was not a new idea. The Church Fathers had argued that a place should be provided for the great Greek philosophers in the Christian scheme of things. Clement of Alexandria, for instance, had argued that minds of the order of Plato and Aristotle could not possibly be entirely separate from the mind of Christ. Nevertheless, as Eric Sharpe points out, "Clement would have been horrified at the thought that these philosophers could be thought as in any sense the equals of Christ. Certainly they have been given insights into the truth, and philosophy could even be called 'the clear image of truth, a divine gift to the Greeks'. But it was only

an image, and not the clear light of truth, and even the philosopher is a child until he has been man by Christ. The philosophers, in short, were offering knowledge, and not salvation: insight into the nature of things, and not sacramental incorporation into a supernatural order of being." (23)

Her sonnets indicate that Mary's belief was essentially the same. Although salvation was to be apprehended in terms of a moral response to revealed truth, it was salvation nevertheless from perdition for eternal bliss. It was stance that was to find more precise expression a little while later by F. D. Maurice in relation to the living traditions which were thrusting themselves increasingly into the Victorian consciousness: "I ask nothing more than the Hindoo system and the Hindoo life as evidence that there is that in man which demands a Revelation - that there is NOT that in him which makes the Revelation. I ask no clearer proof of the fact, that whenever the religious feeling or instinct in man works freely, without an historical revelation, it must beget a system of priestcraft. It must be satisfied by God, or overlaid by man, or stifled altogether." (24) It is nevertheless much further forward than the attitude represented by the Serampore Baptists and which retained possession of the average Christian mind throughout the 19th century.

Unitarianism had been founded on the bed-rock of Scripture. It was the logical, ultimate development of Reformation principles. The doctrine of the Trinity was rejected precisely because it did not have scriptural warrant. It is no longer news that Biblical criticism put paid to the plangent lucidity which we find in the work of a Francis David. But the seriousness of the situation lay in the absence of a mythological framework which gave a convincing meaning to experience. When the authority of Scripture begins to be eroded during the course of the nineteenth century, it is the simple idea expressed by Mary Carpenter which comes to the fore.

### III. APPREHENDING TRUTH IN THE THIRD MILLENIUM

Martineau faced the challenge presented by the Tübingen school, with its radical attempt to see the New Testament as a collection of documents produced by a movement subject to the same historical forces of conflict and compromise as other human groups. (25) His conceptual language is abstract and elegant, but the simple core of the idea which he developed in response to the collapse of the absolute authority of Scripture (printed by me in italics) is essentially the same as the seminal idea in Mary Carpenter's sonnets: "There is in us . . . . . a range of free ideal life, whence we can look down upon the instincts of nature and up to the infinite Holiness, and which we know is in subjection to nothing inflexible. This is precisely what we mean by Spirit – this liberty to move alternatively out of the *thought* and *love* of a reasonable mind; God is a Spirit, in so far as he is not locked up in the invariable order of the world: and there is a spirit in Man, in so far as he is not disposed of by his organism and his dwelling-place, but rises in thought and directs

himself in affection to what is above them." (26) This goes further than Maurice. Mankind is going further than "demanding" a revelation without going so far as to "make" one. He is in fact "sharing" a revelation.

So what has changed for us today? Something makes the essentially simple formulations of Martineau, and its latter-day expression in "religious humanism", no more tenable than Biblical fundamentalism or the self-conscious insouciance of the Christian "re-mythologisers". What is untenable is the optimism. Already, even in the 19th century itself, the optimism evident in the writings of Channing had been criticised by Maurice: "There was nothing in him from which a soul, struggling with life and death, could derive the least help. He was evidently meant for sunshine and gala days." (27) This sense of optimism pervades the writings of our forbears even if the basis for it shifts during the course of the 19th century. In the Carpenters it is expressed in the eschatological language of the Bible: a new age is dawning, as foretold by the prophets of old. The rapid expansion of the known world during the 18th century must have raised apocalyptic expectations, the sense that a corner had been turned in the progress of God's unfolding plan. By the time Martineau (a former pupil of Carpenter's) had fully developed his theology, the ground for optimism had shifted imperceptibly to an idea of "progress". Just as our knowledge of the world was expanding, so was the accessibility of self-evident truth. Once that truth was laid before men, purged of the mystifying accretions of the ages, then humanity would find the "religion of the Spirit" to be a natural growth, soon to blossom in an ever-expanding Unitarian version of truth revealed to the heart of mankind and reflected in Scripture. But we now have no greater faith in "progress" than we have faith in the divine inspiration of the Bible. This is largely because our faith in technology has been shattered. The influence of technology on the climate of optimism is well illustrated by the analogies which Martineau uses to describe the new age of Truth into which the Churches were converging: "Whatever unity may yet arise in Christendom will be no less different from any thing we have yet known than the factory from the monastery, the locomotive from the packhorse, or The Times newspaper from the illuminated manuscript." (28)

The collapse of the grounds of our self-assurance, and increasing contact with and awareness of other cultures has led to a radical change in perspective. The genuine seeker after truth must see himself as exploring traditions which are on a par with his own. How then do we assess what is of value in the Rammohun phenomenon? And how do we express it in either conceptual or mythological terms? Also, the 19th century concept of "progress" was very much a re-interpretation of Christian eschatology, with a linear concept of history moving towards a consummation. Can any new mythology or conceptual framework work on this model?

Perhaps the discontinuity with the past necessitated by our "new" situation is not as sharp as we would wish to believe. Theologians and philosophers of religion who have reflected on the encounter between Christianity and other religions have observed that the challenges produced by the era of rapid colonial expansion has its analogies in the pluralism of the Roman empire amidst which Christianity was born. The Stoic and Alexandrian principle of the "logos spermatikos" ("the seminal word" was regarded by some as God's gift to the Greeks, and a form of divine revelation. It was possible in the light of this principle for Christians to quote the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel, which spoke of the incarnate Word as "the true light which enlightens every man" (John 1:9), and interpret this as meaning that there were indeed various deposits of truth scattered around the various religions and philosophies of the world, needing only to be brought out, made manifest and fulfilled by a Christ who was "Christus Consummator". Until recently, scholars tended to assume that apostolic orthodoxy during the pre-Constantinian period was pestered by minor heterodox aberrations. The discovery of papyri at Nag Hammadi, only recently made available in English (29), shows the extent to which an "alternative" Christianity had developed before its exponents and their Scriptures were ruthlessly suppressed by the newly-established Church in the fourth century A.D.. Speculation – and that is all it can be, given the paucity of documentary evidence – about the brand of religion exemplified by these writings is still in its infancy, and what I have to say begs many questions. But I proceed because the point is broader than a particular version of the history of ideas.

Christian Gnosticism (the accepted label for the "heresy" of which we speak) took as its basis the teaching of Jesus. The pressing question for Gnostics was: How could the important revelation embodied in his sayings be commended to a sophisticated cosmopolitan civilisation, often morally degenerate, but nevertheless heir to an advanced and patently admirable philosophical legacy – like the India of Rammohun's time? Rammohun thought that the fables which formed the basis of "orthodox" Christology would cut little ice with educated Hindus. For the Gnostics, the problem was the Old Testament. Part of the problem for Rammohun was the extent to which he should accommodate some of the "mythological" material embedded in the New Testament. Gnostics solved the problem by regarding such mythological material as provisional – as so much grist to the mill of truth. In other words, the truth embodied by the teaching of Jesus was not dependent on any symbolic or mythological system – even that of the Torah or of the Messianic *kerygma* of the Petrine circle of apostles. Already, we have moved beyond the position of Mary Carpenter. The Christian Gnostics appeared to have an eschatology, but it was one of destruction rather than consummation. In other words, they did not entertain any idea of "progress". The cosmos was a closed and morally neutral system. (I do not believe that Gnosticism in its purest form regarded matter as "evil". Moral dualism was an overlay.) The "spiritual principle" (for want of a more precise and universally acceptable phrase) was journeying



through time and matter without necessarily seeking to express itself in and through these media. In this way, they pre-empted the disillusion which we are heirs to and anticipated that sometimes harsh realism which is and will be undoubtedly necessary for the solving of our ecological problems and which is so difficult to extrapolate from the Judaeo-Christian tradition encumbered with its central notion of Providence. Already, we have travelled beyond the position of Martineau.

It is at this point that I will leave many traditional Unitarians, who have perhaps begun to drag their feet during the last paragraph, far, far behind. The "spiritual principle" which I have mentioned, and which the Gnostics called "gnosis", seems at first sight to be identical to the "spirit" spoken of by Martineau. But Martineau, working within a framework which is essentially optimistic about human nature and the world, believes that this "spirit" is present in equal measure in all humankind. It is simply a matter of furnishing human beings with a reasonably – I use this adverb deliberately – authoritative statement of the truth to elicit an awareness of the spiritual principle within them as the necessary preamble to its needs and aspirations coming to expression in worship and philanthropic endeavour. This is the largely implicit assumption in Rammohun's programme of publishing "purified" Scripture from both the Hindu and Christian traditions. But the Gnostics did not believe that the "gnosis" – an inherent "knowledge" or "insight" into the true nature of the reality which transcends the cosmos – was present in all human beings. By an accident of nature which Gnostics were willing to express in one way or another in mythological terms – including re-workings of the Adam and Eve myth in "Genesis" – only an unspecified number of human beings possessed the "gnosis". In other words, Gnostics were sustained by an élitism wholly foreign to the Unitarian tradition.

Or is it? While the Unitarians may have been reacting against Calvinistic elitism, which made the doctrine of the atonement even more morally repulsive, there is a overwhelming sense among these early Unitarians – among whom I include Rammohun – that history is on their side. Events have proved otherwise. But when I look back, I sense a deep affinity with the likes of Rammohun Roy and Mary Carpenter which transcends mere ideas or personality. The Gnostics would have had ways of explaining this affinity, and why events do not always seem to be on their side, and why the numbers of "enlightened" seem so small.

Most of the affinities we possess with fellow human beings seldom rise to the level of consciousness. They may be affinities of class, race, or culture, or temperament. More often than not, they are complex co-mixture. If self-interest forms the warp of society, these may be said to form the weft. They are deeply rooted in the instinctive life of the species, even if they are justified or explained in language which uses moral or spiritual terms. Circumstances may occasionally arise in which human

minds are brought into contact with each other through the medium of a common language without the benefit or hindrance of strong common affinities. The affinities may be prevented by geography, or, more usually, removed by time. Being the very foundation of human social life, they may be destroyed by death, even if personality or principle survives in written form. It is this latter phenomenon – the survival and manifestation of personality and/or principle when other affinities are not in evidence – which provides the real subject of this lecture.

I go back to Jesus of Nazareth. In terms of the usual affinities none of us have anything in common with this man. But his mind is to a limited extent accessible to us what is in what is preserved of his sayings in the gospels. What happens when we encounter a person in this way? One possibility is that we do not encounter them as a person at all. Literary remains become the object solely of scholarly attention, a source for the history of ideas. In this case, personality or principle can barely be said to have survived at all. This has not happened in the case of Jesus. In his case we have the classic example of the assimilation of remains to the service of a particular race, class or culture. Since these express themselves in myth, the remains of an individual may be "mythologised". This did happen in the case of Jesus. Even before his death it appears that his identity was being assimilated to that of the popular Jewish mythological figure of "the messiah". Since the myth is archetypal, it has endured, and taken the words of Jesus along with it. In these circumstances, I believe that "personality" becomes dependent on the particular form of the myth in any age.

Another possible outcome is that of 1recognition1. Something in the mind of the person is not only encountered, but recognised, and recognised as something valuable, to be cherished. This is not to be confused with an affinity of temperament. When I read the words of Jesus, provided that I can filter out the mythological framework that the evangelists placed them in, I do not encounter personality. What I encounter is "principle", and this transcends the common affinities. There may be said to be an "affinity of principle".

The problem with Jesus of Nazareth as an example is that it has become very difficult, if not impossible, to separate the man from the myth. And yet I believe that the notion of an "affinity of principle" is absolutely central to religion and what is of enduring value in it once the merely human and relative phenomena of class, race and culture have been filtered out. Indeed, if such a concept has any correspondence with an objective Truth, it may hold the key to all our futures insofar as it embodies the triumph of universal altruism over tribal interest, and higher reason over animal instinct.

Despite some of the uncertainties of the present age, there are still folk who cling to the notion that if we could strip Christianity of the accretions of the ages there is

something in the message conveyed by Jesus of Nazareth which is authoritative. To such persons (and I include myself among them) to say that a person is Christ-like is the Ultimate compliment, and it is a compliment which I am inspired to pay to Rammohun Roy. This is rather different to Mary Carpenter's position. For her, Rammohun is one who has "sat at the feet" of Jesus and has been well on the way to apprehending the authoritative and largely exclusive Divine Revelation represented by the Nazarene. What I am saying is that I see the same impulse at work – call it "divine" if you will – in the lives of both of these men. It is a phenomenon which we may witness in the lives of other men and women who we may call "great".

I still glory in the name of "Christian". This is because I admire Jesus of Nazareth. In some ways, I suppose my Christology is fairly conventional: I am drawn by sympathy to Jesus because he was a victim, and I rejoice that in spite of all the Truth embodied in his Word was vindicated. Where I part company with "Christendom" is in my belief that Jesus was as much a victim of the Apostles as of the Jewish establishment of the time. The urgent message of the Nazarene has been struggling to escape from the mythological shackles which Peter and his colleagues loaded it with ever since it was delivered. It has been the unique witness of Unitarians to assist in the deliverance of the Truth. But such is the nature of Truth that anyone who thinks they have found it have it fact lost it, and, as we shall see, our worthy forbears were no exception to this most mystifying of rules.

I admire the subject of this lecture not because he was a "Christian", either implicitly or explicitly, but because he was "Christ-like". He too was a victim to some extent of well-meaning associates who were driven by forces largely beyond their own comprehension to try and imprison their hero in a mythological system to which they were sincerely committed. And, looking back, we see something break free, and we recognise that we have an affinity with it in our hearts, our minds, our souls, or wherever we choose to locate the inner sanctum of our being.

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